

NEW CLOTHES
Colossians 3:12-17

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(online worship only)

Is there one in every classroom, every grade, every school? I'm talking about the boy or girl who doesn't fit in. The one who gets picked on the most, the one who's picked last when classmates divide into groups or teams. In my grade in elementary school, it was a girl named Becky. People told jokes about her, and if it was a cool kid making the joke, and you laughed, well then, you moved up the social ladder a rung or two. Some of the kids said she smelled badly. One day there was a can of deodorant on the floor by her desk, placed there by a particularly mean student. Even if you weren't cruel, even if you'd never do *that*, you wouldn't go out of your way to befriend Becky either.

You wonder if she'd go home at the end of the day and cry. Or would she lie to her mom and say, "School's fine; I have lots of friends."

In a commencement speech at Syracuse University, where he teaches, the writer George Saunders remembered the "Becky" from his 7th grade class. She moved in in the 7th grade, the new girl. She wore glasses that, at the time, only old ladies would wear. She had a habit of chewing on her hair. Her peers were merciless. Looking back at this time in his life, Saunders said this to the graduating seniors, "I've done a lot of embarrassing things in my life, I've made a lot of mistakes, but my only real regrets are failures of kindness. Times when I've failed to be kind."

Our scripture passage comes from a letter written to the church at Colossae, a town in what is now the country of Turkey. You can visit many of the sites mentioned in the letters in the New Testament - you can visit the ruins at Corinth and Philippi, but the city of

Colossae was destroyed by an earthquake only a few years after this letter was written. The place is gone, but this letter remains, and in my heart and mind, this particular passage is among the most moving in all of the New Testament letters.

It starts by naming us, the recipients, in this way: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved...". Holy and beloved. Not for anything we've done, or accomplished, or produced. Just because we are. We are God's beloved children. All of us. All of the Beckys of the world, and even those who tormented her. The umbrella of grace and forgiveness is the biggest umbrella there is.

"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved," and then the letter goes on to tell us what to wear. The letter writer seems to know that we have choices. "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." These are choices. There are other items we could pull out of the closet. We could clothe ourselves with impatience, for example. Or bitterness, or resentment, or even meanness. Gosh, think of the clothes we've seen people wear lately. Clothes like intolerance, anger - not righteous anger, but rage. We've seen violence on display, arrogance, jealousy.

How would the world be different if the clothes we wore were compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience? How would the world be different if most people wore those clothes?

I can almost hear your inner dialogue, because it is mine as well. These words, "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience", they're too soft. They're mushy. They're - well, some people would call them feminine. They're unrealistic.

Let's say you have an 18-year-old, and you're preparing him to go to college this fall. Six months from now, he'll be moving into the dorm. You want him to be ready for whatever he might face. Loneliness, home-sickness. Self-doubt when his chosen major

just doesn't feel right anymore. He'll face peer pressure, surely. Questions of identity. His professors may be more critical than the teachers in high school; his grades may suffer. He may be faced for the first time with some hard financial realities as he tries to juggle a job with school, or as he signs daunting student loan papers. How do you prepare him for all of that? You tell him to wear clothes that say "strength, determination, perseverance, fortitude." I doubt that "meekness" would even enter your mind.

Those two lists, they don't have to be mutually exclusive. Your child can learn to be both confident and humble. She can develop patience along with perseverance. This list from Colossians is not meant to define the only set of characteristics we develop. Isn't it possible for kindness to be muscular? Like the phrase, "tough love," kindness can mean that we approach other people with unconditional love but also with honesty and assertiveness. And kindness always wants the best for the other person. It is never manipulative.

What does it feel like to put on the piece of clothing labeled "meekness"? It doesn't mean you're quiet as a mouse, ashamed of your voice. It doesn't mean that you talk in self-deprecating ways or that you don't have anything of value to say. It means that sometimes you choose to let others have the floor. You don't have to have the last word, you don't have to be the loudest in the room. It can even be a relief sometimes to realize that you don't have to have all the answers or solve every problem. Meekness is a step towards realizing that while we all have gifts, none of us is indispensable. And meekness acknowledges that it's always best to take a step back when we're angry. Before you hit the send button, before you honk the horn, before you react in violence, remember: you're wearing meekness.

The t-shirt labeled “humility” is right next to meekness in the closet. They’re similar, aren’t they? But humility is so tricky. You may be one of the many, many people who are more aware of your faults than you are of your God-given gifts. You may have received the message as a child, either in words or just in a feeling you absorbed, that you aren’t quite good enough. That you’re a disappointment. Maybe someone’s told you, along the line, that they wished you were smarter or that you made more money. Maybe you just look in the mirror every day and compare yourself to others, noticing all of your faults and none of the qualities your loved ones see in you. That’s called shame. It’s low self-esteem. And if that’s where you are, go back to the beginning of our passage and read it again and again, “You are holy and beloved.” Hear God say those words to you. We all need to be reminded from time to time.

Humility is something different. Humility starts from a place of healthy self-awareness. A humble person knows that she has been given talents to share with the world, but she knows that everyone else has too. And this broken world will only begin to heal when all of us contribute. A humble person doesn’t downplay her strengths; she delights in collaborating with others. She doesn’t seek the spotlight or coyly try to avoid it. She doesn’t even notice the spotlight; she’s too busy backstage, figuring out how the production can be more creative, more joyful, more inclusive.

These are the clothes we wear, on our best days, as people who bear the name of Christ. We put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. We don’t wear them perfectly, but we keep putting them on, trying to get them to fit, or actually - trying to get our own egos and spirits and habits to fit them. Above it all, let’s call it a sweater or a coat - above it all, we put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. We probably won’t achieve it very often - that’s why it’s called perfect. It’s

aspirational, it's a goal. We hear the sound of that perfect harmony every now and then. You know it, when you've done something purely compassionate. The feeling pours over you. You shared something with someone from the healthiest place within you. You loved in a way that brought out the best in the other. And you know it when you receive it, too. Genuine kindness lifts your spirits and touches you deeply at the same time.

If kindness is muscular and strong, with the power to effect change, then that must mean that we can become kinder the more we practice. That's how muscles work, after all. The more you work them, the stronger they become. Here's the good news. Small acts of kindness make a difference. They make a difference to those we serve, and they in turn serve to make us kinder. Don't you think that a brand-new handmade blanket might warm someone who's homeless in more ways than one? Knowing that someone took the time to select a lovely fabric and that these were made with love? A few weeks ago, on a cold drizzly Friday, Doug and I, along with Rich and Candy General, delivered meals for the Haven Center. We loaded up the van that belongs to Neighborhood Alliance. Meals in styrofoam containers, meant to be microwaved. Bags of dry food - little boxes of cereal, containers of applesauce, granola bars, chips. Labeled for each family, depending on how many people to a motel room. You knock on the door and wait. If no one answers, you leave the food at the door. I was grateful for those who answered. I wanted to say "hello", I wanted them to have some human contact. I tried to imagine how it would feel to be living in a motel room, by myself, or with a partner. We delivered to a family of six. I tried to imagine living in a motel room, with four children, in the middle of the winter, in the middle of a pandemic. It's tragic in more ways than we can count. But kindness softens the blow somewhat. That knock on the door is a reminder that someone cares.

These acts of kindness cause us to see each other and treat one another as human beings. They make a difference. I know that acts of charity are not the same as acts of justice. I know that those of us who live with privilege face two very real temptations. One is that we will feel self-satisfied that with our acts of charity, and we won't take the next step of striving towards changing systemic injustice. The other temptation is that we stay away from acts of kindness and charity altogether, because we know they can be fraught interactions. We might say the wrong thing, we might act as if we're better than the person we're helping. I believe that acts of charitable kindness can lead us towards acts of justice, as long as we truly see the persons we're helping, see them as whole people, people with potential and dignity.

This past Thursday, in Pebble Beach, California, Kamaiu Johnson made his PGA debut. To say it was unlikely is an understatement. His story starts with the kindness of a woman named Jan Auger. One day in 2007, when Johnson was 13, Auger was playing golf with friends at a golf course in Tallahassee. She was an assistant golf pro there. The fourth hole ran by the apartment complex where Johnson lived with his family. As Auger's group played the fourth, Johnson was outside watching, mimicking swings with what Auger thought was a golf club.

His swing was smooth and natural, helped by years of playing baseball. "When you're around golf," Auger said, "you notice people who have a fluid swing. Not mechanical. And as I got closer, I realized that he wasn't swinging a golf club. It was just a stick."

It was a school day and she asked Johnson why he wasn't in class. He lied and said he was home schooled. In fact, he had dropped out. He wasn't a good student. He

didn't test well and was put in "exceptionally slow learning" classes, separated from friends. He got picked on a lot.

"I was so lost in life," Johnson said. "So depressed at a young age."

His father was "out of the picture," but it was a loving family. And poor. As many as ten family members lived in the cramped, two-bedroom apartment bordering the golf course. Golf, an expensive often exclusive sport, was not part of his world.

But then, on that day, Jan Auger approached this rudderless teen swinging a stick, and asked him if he wanted to hit a bucket of balls with an actual golf club. "He did look a little sad to me when I walked up to him," Auger said. "It was just something to brighten his day, I guess." Turns out it changed Kamaiu Johnson's life.

Johnson describes hitting the bucket of balls. "I held the club in my hand and tried to figure out the best way to grip it, to swing it," he wrote. "I won't lie to you, I wasn't quite a natural. It was a bit rough at first. But, man, that first day I flushed one. Just totally pure. I watched the ball float up past the trees, into the sun and back down to earth. It was perfect. And I was hooked."

After that, an offer from Auger. If he did chores around the course, he could hit range balls for free and play for \$1 a round. Johnson eagerly said, "deal." "It was like, all of a sudden I had purpose," he said. "Y'know all of a sudden I wanted to be as good at golf as I could be."

What followed was a kaleidoscope of experiences and people that helped turn his sudden passion into skill. The kid who failed in school (he would go on to get his GED)

was, in fact, a great learner. He practiced endlessly. Countless Samaritans gave him money for tournament entry fees. And last week, he made it to Pebble Beach.

Jan Auger, who Johnson calls his second mom, tuned in from Florida.

It all started because she saw him, she looked in his eyes, she treated him as a human being with imminent worth and potential, and she acted with kindness. We know what clothes she was wearing that day.

Amen.

*Kamaiu Johnson's story came from NPR: <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/11/966623722/a-golfers-dream-delayed-but-finally-realized-at-the-games-highest-level>